

# Beds, Handkerchiefs, and Moving Objects in *Othello*

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## Abstract

This paper argues that a viewer watching *Othello* in an unfamiliar language, without subtitles, can more narrowly focus upon the life of things in the play and in adaptations or appropriations of it. Jane Bennett argues in *Vibrant Matter* for a renewed vital materialism — an emphasis on objects in the world and on attributing agency or actantial ability to them. In Shakespeare's *Othello*, two objects dominate the play: most obviously, the handkerchief; less obviously, because it is sometimes part of the stage, the bed in which Desdemona is smothered. I consider the ways in which three films, a South Indian art film, a North Indian "Bollywood" musical, and an Italian "Shakespearean" adaptation of *Othello* permit these objects to act expressively. These adaptations (*Kaliyattam*; *Omkara*; *Iago*) indigenize and transform both the handkerchief and the "tragic loading" of the bed, in the last case turning (or returning) the Shakespearean source from tragedy to comedy.

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## Introduction

This essay emerges from a series of challenges that Alexa Alice Joubin issued to Shakespeareans in her edited special issue of the British journal *Shakespeare*, in which her own essay, "Global Shakespeares as Methodology," asks: "How can Global Shakespeares be a methodology? What can we learn about Shakespeare without Shakespeare's language?" (Joubin 2013). Joubin suggests that imagining Global Shakespeare as a methodology might include: questioning the orientation of our Shakespearean world maps and enquiring where, and why, we do not find Shakespeare; commenting upon the failure of the metaphor of the map or the globe, and imagining other ways of organizing our knowledge about the world; seeking out archival silences within the record of globalization, moving from present to past, even as we might also work from past to future in examining the early modern and modern fascination with "the globe" and the global. Here I offer another approach to Global Shakespeare Studies. It seemed to me that, absent the language, we would pay more attention to the role of objects and character and action. I therefore intervene with a new methodology for Global Shakespeare: to watch three versions of *Othello* in languages that I do not understand — and to see what I learned.

### Acting Objects

A viewer watching *Othello* in an unfamiliar language can more narrowly focus upon the life of things in the play and in appropriations surrounding it. Two *things* dominate the play: most obviously, the handkerchief; less obviously, because it is sometimes part of the stage, the bed in which Desdemona is smothered. This essay considers the ways in which a South Indian art film in the Dravidian language Malayalam, a North Indian "Bollywood" movie in the Uttar Pradesh dialect Khariboli, and an Italian teen movie adaptation of *Othello* permit or prohibit objects from acting expressively. These adaptations (*Kaliyattam*; *Omkara*; *Iago*) indigenize and transform both the handkerchief and the "tragic loading" of the bed (5.2.426), in the last case turning (or returning) the Shakespearean source from tragedy to comedy.<sup>1</sup>

I am deliberately cultivating in this essay what Jane Bennett, in *Vibrant Matter*, calls a new "anthropomorphism," a renewed "vibrant materialism" — an emphasis on objects in the world and on attributing agency or actantial ability to them. Bennett adapts the vital materialism of Spinoza and Bergson, Driesch's notion of "entelechy," and the object-oriented ontology of Bruno Latour in order to argue, paradoxically, against a deterministic or mechanistic force in the universe and against what seems to us like an intuitive and immovable distinction between life and matter (and here current events overtake theory: given the debates surrounding whether or not the matter of a human body is "alive" when connected to a life-support machine, clearly we need to continue theorizing what we understand as life or activity or agency or, to use Bennett's preferred term, intensities [2009]).

Using examples of material unpredictability ranging from the unprecedented change in the direction of electrons that caused the eastern seaboard blackout in 2003 to the changing status of stem cells in law, Bennett suggests that we start thinking of agents or movers as "assemblages" rather than individual humans or even individual objects. "'Objects' appear as such because their becoming proceeds at a speed or a level below the threshold of human discernment," she writes (Bennett 2009, 58). Moreover, "Assemblages are not governed by any central head: no one materiality or type of material has sufficient competence to determine consistently the trajectory or impact of the group" (24). How, then, can change or action take place?" Alongside and inside singular human agents there exists a heterogenous series of actants with partial, overlapping, and conflicting degrees of power and effectivity" (33). Actions happen collectively, enabled by multiple actants that function together to form the assemblage. Intensities manifest themselves at different points in the process that is action and at different sites within the assemblage. Action is the end

result, but it is futile to attempt, in Bennett's materialism, to trace back a sequence of events in order to isolate a single agent or decision that makes an outcome inevitable.

To a certain extent, we can predict how actants, including objects, will act through "entelechy," a force within objects that contains the potential to shape them but yet does not define them, nor does it necessitate the object's or the process's taking form in a specific way. Akin, Bennett suggests, to Kant's "purposiveness" in art, entelechy offers a plan for the object's or the event's development but without compromising the pluripotentiality also innate within the object. "Entelechy coordinates parts on behalf of a whole in response to events and does so without following a rigid plan; it answers events innovatively and perspicuously, deciding on the spot and in real time which of the many possible courses of development will in fact happen" (Bennett 2009, 75). In other words, Bennett argues that we cannot predict what material objects, even elements, will do under every particular instance; while she does not attribute agency or identity to material objects, she does suggest that complex events can be better explained by imagining agency as a cluster of "intensity" that can be transmitted and distributed among human and non-human agents. Life itself emerges from the interactions among human and non-human matter.

Critiques of Latour's object-oriented ontology and of Bennett's vital materialism have emerged from various points on the political spectrum.<sup>2</sup> Some accuse the new vital materialism of reinscribing a kind of holy mysticism or soul within objects, and of enshrining a quietist neo-humanism. We might also note that despite Bennett's critique of anthropocentric mechanism, one could retort that perhaps one of the reasons we cannot predict (in one of her examples) the direction in which a stream of electrons will flow is that we do not yet fully understand the underlying principles or forces; taken to its logical conclusion, Bennett's vital materialism might merely postpone the triumph of a mechanistic universe dominated by *homo scientificus*. In an interview with Peter Gratton, Bennett admits to the charge of normative biologism but suggests that complex assemblages will never be fully understood:

I think that we are in fact constrained by some sort of nature, that we are free to operate but within iterated structures . . . nature or materiality constrains human (and nonhuman) activities but because nature or materiality is not a perfect machine, it and we are never fully analyzable. There is always something that escapes . . . The need to be kind and respectful to other bodies will remain, regardless of whether one understands human individuals and groups as embodied minds/souls or as complex materialities. (Bennett, quoted in Gratton 2010)

Bennett defends herself against the charge of quietism by pointing out her own reliance on what she calls "strategic anthropomorphism" or a "Machiavellian . . . indirect" political agency. When pressed to imagine specific political changes that vital materialism could inspire, she suggests:

There seems to be a resonance between the idea of matter as dull stuff/passive resource and a set of gigantically wasteful production and consumption practices . . . [that] endanger and immiserate workers, children, animals, and plants here and abroad. To the extent that the figure of inert matter sustains this consumptive style, another figure might disrupt it. (Bennett, quoted in Khan 2012, 50)

Counter-intuitively, Bennett's vital materialism is "pragmatic." She argues that "ethics and politics have more traction on material assemblages and the way they reproduce patterns of effects than they can have on that elusive spiritual entity called the 'moral subject'" (Bennett, quoted in Khan 2012, 54).

There are some inconsistencies in Bennett's position, notably with regard to what is normative or even what she earlier called "pragmatic." She acknowledges in the interview with Khan that she "support[s] medical — in the sense of biochemical — discourses on schizophrenia," including research into "brain science and pharmacological agents that might re-calibrate the delicate chemistry that makes normal thinking possible." Her support for such endeavors draws from her own experiences growing up with a brother with schizophrenia (Bennett, quoted in Khan 50). Yet in her essay "Powers of the Hoard" she asks us to "meet the people, the hoarders, not as bearers of mental illness but as differently-abled bodies that might have special sensory access to the call of things" (Bennett 2012, 244), and suggests that we might consider "paranoia . . . less as a psychological disorder than as an over-extended receptivity to the activeness of material bodies" (Bennett 2012, 268).

Of course, a medicalized and a vibrant materialist outlook are not necessarily incompatible — we could study hoarding as a phenomenon in which "thing-power" becomes manifest while simultaneously imagining a therapeutic praxis that would attend to the desires of the assemblage of objects, family members, microbiomes, heavy metals, and so on that distribute agency around the body of the so-called hoarder — but Bennett herself does not in this essay offer any solutions, pragmatic or otherwise, to the disabling and unhappy predicament in which this distributed agency finds itself. Diana Coole more overtly makes the case for vital matter and other kinds of "critical new materialism" or "new material ontologies" as effective political strategies to alleviate "normative concerns about social justice"; she suggests that it offers "a detailed phenomenology

of diverse lives as they are actually lived — often in ways that are at odds with abstract normative theories or official ideologies" (Coole and Frost 2010, 27).

### "Fairey Napkins"

I will return to the ethical repercussions of vibrant materialism or object-oriented critical ontologies later, but first I want to demonstrate the productive generation of this kind of intensity surrounding the famous handkerchief in *Othello*. In *Shakespeare and Literary Theory*, Jonathan Gil Harris uses Deleuze and Guattari and Latour's Actor-Network-Theory to argue for the handkerchief as a rhizomatic network connecting multiple actors, meanings, and even time periods (Harris 2009, 61). Bennett's vibrant materialism also builds on Deleuze and Guattari and on Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, but she adds to or inflects her sources with a re-enchantment of the material world. (Remember that Bennett suggests objects only appear as inert matter to us because we move and perceive too slowly to acknowledge their becoming.) The handkerchief is enchanted: it might or might not have been dyed in mummy made from maidens' hearts, but it operates as if alive. It is helpful to think of the handkerchief as a human/non-human hybrid or assemblage, an actant bearing within it a certain entelechy, but one that requires the coordination of human and non-human forces (for example, the gravity that lets the handkerchief fall, Othello's pushing it away, Emilia's taking it up) in order for the tragedy to take place.

The handkerchief shrouds its movements, at least early on, in mystery. How does it get from Othello to Desdemona and from Desdemona to Emilia? Folio and Quarto offer no help.<sup>3</sup> The 1622 Quarto reads (figure 1):

*Oth.* Your napkin is too little:

Let it alone, come I'll goe in with you.

*Des.* I am very sorry that you are not well.

*Em.* I am glad I haue found this napkin,

*Ex. Oth. and Desd.*

This was her first remembrance from the Moore. (TLN 1961-65, 3.3., Hv)

Sometime after Desdemona's sympathetic words and the lovers' exit, Emilia sees and obtains the handkerchief. What happens in the space between those lines? Does Othello angrily push the napkin away from him and leave it on the ground, or on a table? Does he trample it underfoot and leave it stained, as in Orson Welles's 1952 film (*Othello*, figure 2)?

The 1623 Folio reads (figure 3):

*Oth.* Your Napkin is too little:

Let it alone: Come, Ile go in with you. *Exit.*

*Des.* I am very sorry that you are not well.

*AEmil.* I am glad I haue found this Napkin. (TLN 1921-24, 3.3 TT5 col.1, p. 325)

This text leaves open the possibility that Desdemona and Othello exit separately, although if Desdemona remains on stage after Othello leaves, why doesn't Desdemona notice the loss of her handkerchief immediately? Does Desdemona "let it drop by negligence," as Emilia says (3.3.356)? Does it fall out of Desdemona's bodice? Does Emilia, as she later says, "filch" it from Desdemona's hand (3.3.361)? The word *filch* first appears in 1575 in John Awdeley's cony-catching pamphlet *The Fraternity of Vagabonds*, revealed as canting slang for the theft of small things. Shakespeare uses it only used twice in the canon, both times in the so-called temptation scene, 3.3, of *Othello*. Cassio laments, "he that filches from me my good name / Robs me of that which not enriches him / And makes me poor indeed" (188), and Emilia asks Iago of the handkerchief, "What will you do with't, that you have been so earnest / To have me filch it?" (361). I speculate that Shakespeare enjoyed the sound-echo with "filth," but such surmises must remain unprovable.

The handkerchief is unpredictable, a "trifle . . . light as air" (3.3.370) so light that it threatens to render the tragedy farcical, as Thomas Rymer complained:

So much ado, so much stress, so much passion and repetition about an Handkerchief! . . . Had it been Desdemona's Garter, the Sagacious Moor might have smelt a rat, but the Handkerchief is so remote a trifle, no Booby, on this side Mauritania, could make any consequence from it . . . Desdemona dropt the Handkerchief, and missed it that very day after her Marriage; it might have been rump'l'd up with her Wedding sheets: And this Night that she lay in her wedding sheets, the Fairey Napkin (whilst Othello was stifling her) might have started up to disarm his fury, and stop his ungracious mouth . . . Then might he . . . touch'd with remorse, have honestly cut his own Throat, by the good leave, and with the applause of all the Spectators. Who might thereupon have gone home with a quiet mind, admiring the beauty of Providence; fairly and truly represented on the Theatre. (Rymer 1693, K6-K7)

I do not endorse Rymer's reading, but he is correct that the magic handkerchief or "Fairey Napkin" connects to other problems in performing *Othello*: the credibility of Iago's deception and the violence of Othello's response, problems to which filmmakers respond in different ways. The three films that I study here attempt to compensate for the handkerchief's lightness by disenchanting it, by substituting for it an object of more immediately erotic significance to Desdemona and

Othello, by adding additional motive to the Emilia character and, in *Kaliyattam*, by distributing agency and blame across supernatural actants (Hindu deities) located outside human or human-made assemblages.

### *Kaliyattam*

Jayaraaj's award-winning film *Kaliyattam* (figure 4) transfers Shakespeare's play to the South Indian state of Kerala and casts Othello as Perumalayan Kannan, the lead dancer in a complex religious dance practice and ritual called *Theyyam*. During *Theyyam*, the lead dancer becomes the deity incarnate, acting as a manifestation of the divine rather than as himself. Kannan wears his make-up to become the deity, but also, in this film, to murder his wife Thamara, tricked by the duplicity of a jealous player in the troupe, Paniyan, who yearns for a leading role. The handkerchief becomes a red and gold *patta*, a scarf or robe that in this film is a wedding gift also used as a bedspread or as ceremonial marriage sheets (figures 5-8). Poonam Trivedi suggests that "Jayaraaj even betters Shakespeare here" (2007, 151) in associating the handkerchief with the vibrant color red, associated with fertility (figure 9). The childless Cheerma, Trivedi suggests, now has another motive for her theft of the *patta* (figure 10), namely her desire to please her husband by giving him children. On the one hand, human agents in *Kaliyattam* such as the Emilia-character Cheerma work more intensively towards the tragic denouement. By forcing the Emilia character Cheerma actively to steal the *patta* from Thamara's Hope Chest and by making the handkerchief explicitly eroticized, the director has effectively done what Rymer suggested and made Desdemona drop her garter. On the other, Shakespeare's play carefully leaves open the possibility that there is indeed "magic in the web" of the handkerchief (3.4.81): that it is to a certain extent the center of what Bennett might call an intensity that approaches agency. It turns both Paniyan and Cheerma into brides (figures 11 and 12). The point is that the handkerchief is precisely a "trifle light as air" and that Emilia's actions, as Coleridge said of Iago's, are "motiveless" (1835-36, 36-37). The handkerchief-object can only work its magic as part of a human/non-human assemblage.

*Kaliyattam* does not eradicate non-human agents, however; it brings in supernatural elements and the natural world to relocate the enchantment of the handkerchief within the mythology of *Theyyam*. Repeated shots of Perumalayan and Thamara smeared with the former's theatrical make-up after love-making (figure 13) and of the pots shattering on the floor in the violence of their love evoke a supernatural or spiritual element to the tragedy, again in an attempt to wrest the enchantment out of the handkerchief. A shot of Thamara and Perumalayan looking at their own smudged reflections in a circular mirror turns their post-coital languor suddenly ominous (figure 14), an image that perhaps recalls a well-known moment in Welles's film in which Othello

and Iago are mirrored back to themselves and to the viewer as Othello muses, "Haply for I am black . . ." (3.3.304; a still from one of the many shots with the circular mirror is reproduced in Stratford 2015). When the anguished Perumalayan calls out to the deities, they come to him on the mountain in full costume only to turn their backs on him ostentatiously (figure 15). After Perumalayan suffocates Thamara and Cheerma reveals the truth about the patta, Perumalayan hunts down Paniyan and beats him almost to death, after which Perumalayan immolates himself on the ritual purification fire of the Theyyam, with which the film has opened. There's no tragic loading of the bed; the lovers die apart.

### *Omkara*

Bhardwaj's *Omkara* (figure 16) sets Shakespeare's play among rough gangsters in Uttar Pradesh, even down to deploying the distinct Khariboli language common amongst rural peoples of this area rather than the standard Bollywood Hindustani. Dolly, the beloved daughter of a high-ranking lawyer, falls in love with Omkara or Omi, a thug employed by a local politico to kneecap his opponents. Omkara kidnaps Dolly from her wedding to Rajju (the Rodrigo character) and, with the intercession of the politico, her father is reconciled to the upcoming wedding of Omi and Dolly. After a major coup, Omkara promotes Kesu (Cassio) over Langda (Iago), who vows revenge and convinces his wife Indu to steal a bejeweled *kamarbandh* (a cummerbund or waistband, figure 17), a piece of wedding jewelry belonging to Dolly, which Langda will use to convince Omkara that Dolly is having a clandestine affair with Kesu. Convinced by the *kamarbandh* and by an overheard conversation, Omkara kills Dolly on their wedding night, killing himself after Indu reveals Dolly's innocence.

The film disenchants the handkerchief by making the token explicitly erotic (it features in nearly every scene in which Omi and Dolly are intimate) and is itself caressed and beloved by other characters. Moreover, it is valuable in itself — made of precious metals and jewels — and, like the patta in *Kaliyattam*, forms part of a trousseau or wedding set. At the same time, the movie leaves it mysterious *how* Indu/Emilia gets this *kamarbandh*. We see it on Dolly's body as the camera pans up before she and Omkara make love, we see Omkara kissing it on her body (on a standing and fixed bed, not a traditional Indian swing-bed), during a love-scene interrupted by the brawl (set up by Langda) in which Kesu disgraces himself.

The *kamarbandh* explicitly associates eroticism with the threat of violence, and even with male arousal at the prospect of that violence. We next see it during the love-song "O Saathi Re," in the context of a montage love-scene showing Omi and Dolly's romance. The montage interpolates defused threats of battery. Kesu teaches Dolly the Stevie Wonder song "I Just Called To Say I



Love You," and when Dolly sings it to Omkara, he laughs at her attempt. Angered, she play-fights him; they mock arm-wrestle; she pretends to threaten Omkara with a shotgun. Next we see Indu the Emilia character holding the kamarbandh and turning it over in her hands as if she's envious, watching the happiness of Omi and Dolly. After this scene, the next time we see the kamarbandh is when Indu gives it to Langda, who laughs with glee as he dresses himself up as a mock bride with the kamarbandh on his face (figure 18).

Note the parallels with *Kaliyattam*, as both Iago characters use the handkerchief-function to mimic the joy of the new bride — it's perhaps a displaced homoeroticism (a subtext missing from both these films, although it appears prominently in, say, Oliver Parker's 1995 U.S. film of *Othello*). In *Omkara* the image even recalls a specific piece of bridal jewelry to be worn on the head: the *matta pati*. In all these shots the kamarbandh is as a character — in shot — at the expense of human characters.<sup>4</sup>

The sight of the kamarbandh on Langda's face intensifies its eroticism because we have previously seen this piece of jewelry on Dolly's belly, pointing towards her lower body. Later scenes associate the kamarbandh with the traditional Indian swing-bed. Kesu seems mesmerized by the hypnotic movement of the kamarbandh as Langda offers it to him. The swing-bed, a traditional piece of furniture, appears many times in this film both to foreshadow the murder-scene and to unsettle the viewer's point-of-view the way that Langda makes it impossible for Omkara to contemplate Dolly as faithful or steadfast. In this sense the use of the moving bed and the rocking camera recalls what Dan Juan Gil calls the "asocial sexuality" of Orson Welles's *Othello* brought out by that film through destabilizing camera angles and shot-reverse shots that don't quite match (Gil 2005). Asocial sexuality fits particularly well for this film: gangsters are asocial in every sense "because they break up the social fabric of human relations. Organized crime disenchant objects and dehumanizes people. (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)

### *Iago*

My final film takes us from tragedy to farce. Volfgango de Biasi's *Iago* (2009; figure 19) transforms Shakespeare's tragedy of love into a teen comedy. Set among architecture students in a prestigious college in a 1980s-inflected twenty-first century, the film presents Iago as a hard-working and intelligent orphan who supports his aged aunt; Desdemona as the privileged princess-daughter of the Rector of the University; and Otello as a former childhood playmate of Desdemona, returned after many years, the spoiled, lazy scion of a rich black donor who is Brabantio's close friend. This Cassio is indeed "a fellow almost damn'd in a fair wife" (1.1.22): he collects women

and their pictures, snapping Polaroids of his lovers that he annotates with their telephone numbers and sexual idiosyncracies and files away in an index-card box.

*Iago* is a shallow movie: it depends upon a hip soundtrack, shiny costumes, and sexual innuendo for its claims to popularity. This is Shakespeare mediated through Baz Luhrmann, complete with *Romeo + Juliet's* masquerade ball and the extravagantly choreographed group dancing of *Moulin Rouge* (1996 and 2001). Nonetheless, I found *Iago* helpful in thinking about how we understand agency, or rather what Bennett calls "intensities," surrounding action in this play. It distributes the handkerchief's function among several items: a Polaroid snapshot of Desdemona and Cassio kissing, taken by Iago in seemingly a more innocent time but later used by Iago to fuel Otello's jealousy (figure 20); a lace handkerchief left by Desdemona in the ladies' room, stolen by Emilia and planted by Iago in Cassio's bed (figure 21); and the compact disc containing the group's work, which Iago replaces with a broken one in order to frame Cassio as a drunkard and a slacker (figure 22). All these objects share the blame, as it were, for Otello's gulling.

Unlike in Shakespeare (or in the first two films), in this film the bed is not the only place to have sex: we see Otello and Desdemona embracing in an old library, an implied threesome among Iago, Cassio, and Bianca in the architectural studio (figure 23), and Rodrigo, a flamboyant cross-dresser in fabulous ball-gown, wig, and makeup, fondling the bare legs of the dancing crowd during the great set-piece masquerade ball at which Desdemona and Otello first kiss. Three scenes, however, feature a bed prominently. Brabantio, summoned profanely by Rodrigo (who is disguised in drag) and Iago, interrupts a post-coital Desdemona and Otello; Desdemona defends herself with dignity, as in Shakespeare's play. Iago plants the handkerchief in Cassio's bed, under the pillow, where Cassio, upon finding it, cannot imagine which of his many conquests might have left it there.

Just as in Shakespeare's *Othello*, the bed appears prominently in the final scene to connote marital union. In this version, however, Otello is long vanquished, and the consummation devoutly to be wished emerges between Desdemona and Iago. The sequence begins with Emilia castigating Desdemona for Iago's behavior, after which a penitent Desdemona is seen approaching Iago's house, a statue of the Virgin Mary in the background behind her. Iago's aunt at first refuses to let her in, but ultimately relents; Desdemona sits on Iago's bed, a four-poster with red curtains.

As Iago regards Desdemona in surprise, the film frames the bed as a kind of discovery space between the bed-curtains. Desdemona and Iago exchange glances — you can see Iago framed by the curtains with a cross in the background (figure 24) — and Desdemona scolds him, removes her leather jacket to reveal that she is wearing a transparent blouse that displays her breasts, walks over to him by the window, kisses him aggressively, and the screen floods with red light. The film

ends with the lovers in a clinch, the bed in the background, after which a pair of red curtains close the scene, the film, and the play.

## Conclusion

Bennett writes, in discussing the energy traders that the press and many consumers considered responsible for the great Northeastern blackout of 2003:

Autonomy and strong responsibility seem to me to be empirically false, and thus their invocation seems tinged with injustice. In emphasizing the ensemble nature of action and the interconnections between persons and things, a theory of vibrant matter presents individuals as simply incapable of bearing *full responsibility* for their effects. (Bennett 2009, 37; emphasis mine)

Critics note, however, that the victims of the blackout (like the victims of so-called rogue traders during the financial crisis in 2008) bore the full responsibility of the consequences. Bennett acknowledges that there's something satisfying, humanly speaking, in attributing blame to "deregulation and corporate greed," but suggests that a modified ethical response for individual human beings under such circumstances — in which assemblages, rather than individual human entities, distribute both agency and blame — must be to ask oneself about "the assemblages in which one finds oneself participating . . . Do I attempt to extricate myself from assemblages whose trajectory is likely to do harm?" (Bennett 2009, 37). Anticipating accusations of quietism, she makes the case for "moral outrage" under certain circumstances, but suggests that de-emphasizing "material agency" merely in order to condemn particular humans risks "legitimat[ing] vengeance and elevat[ing] violence" over courses of political action (Bennett 2009, 38).

Avoiding blame is very counterintuitive, both to many who identify themselves as political progressives and to those who see themselves as conservatives in the tradition of populism. All of us, on some level, would love to find someone to blame for the market crash of 2008. Yet even as I resisted Bennett's notion of distributed blame among assemblages rather than humans, I thought of the success of Nelson Mandela's Truth and Reconciliation movement in the free South Africa. Resisting the urge to attribute blame to specific human beings, in that instance, indeed enabled the reconstruction of a juster and freer and more unified polity. And peculiarly enough, a focus on material trappings and gloss and sheen in Volfgango di Biasi's teen-movie is what enables tragedy to become comedy. Instead of watching silently during the eavesdropping scene, Otello interrupts Cassio and Bianca and beats up Cassio in order to take the handkerchief back to Desdemona. Otello slaps Desdemona (this is a version of Shakespeare's 4.1), but then directs his anger against the

scale model of the town piazza that his group was designing. Othello destroys the group project, but expresses no more violence towards Desdemona. Then follow a series of angry but non-violent confrontations: Cassio admonishes Iago, Iago censures Othello for shirking his work on the project, Desdemona reproaches Iago for his trickery, Iago rebukes Desdemona for abandoning him, Brabantio reprimands and expels Othello, Desdemona scolds and breaks up with Othello, Emilia castigates Desdemona for being a tease — in other words, a comic resolution requires that blame be quite thoroughly "distributed" among various persons, situations, and objects and that violence be deflected or diverted. Where Shakespeare's Othello, Desdemona, Emilia and possibly even Iago end the play a tangled assemblage of bodies dead and partly living, Iago's insouciant teens extricate themselves from assemblages that threaten to harm them, with no apparent ill-effects.<sup>5</sup> Instead of tolerating the blow that Othello strikes, Desdemona leaves him and asserts her independence; instead of destroying Desdemona and then himself, Othello breaks the assembled city-model and then removes himself from the potentially harmful assemblage of Othello, Desdemona, and Iago.

Shakespeare's *Othello* has from its first performances been associated with the problem of blame and evil. Rymer famously and facetiously expressed his own "vital materialism" in blaming the handkerchief for the tragedy. Readers as diverse as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Agatha Christie (in her posthumously published novel *Curtain* [Coleridge 1835-36; Christie 1975]) consider Iago the arch-engineer of the tragic plot. Feminist critics such as Ania Loomba have long pointed out that whatever Iago does does not justify Othello's murdering Desdemona and that we cannot understand the outcome independently of race and sexuality (1989). In performance, Othello and Iago vie for the role of tragic hero or anti-hero, to such an extent that in 1956 at the Old Vic, John Neville and Richard Burton took turns playing each part. Scholars have proposed various theories of Shakespearean tragedy over the years — tragedy of character (Bradley); radical or decentered tragedy, in which the subject itself is deconstructed (Belsey); tragedy borne out of political struggle and the subordination of various kinds of human (Dollimore); "festive" or sacrificial tragedy (Liebler). But perhaps Shakespearean tragedies are tragedies of entelechy and matter, vital matter. Tragedies of entelechy are Dionysian, in Nietzsche's sense (1994) — tragedies of becoming, of humans' inability to perceive objects becoming meaningful and agentic and of their becoming inert matter ("O Desdemon! Dead, Desdemon! Dead! O, O!" [5.2.332]) from vibrant life ("Kill me tomorrow" [5.2.100]) — and of the liminal electron-cloudy space between the two.

### Notes

1. Quotations from Shakespeare's works come from the Folger Digital Texts, unless otherwise indicated.

2. See, for example, the special issue of *the minnesota review* edited by medievalist Andrew Cole, which includes essays that both critique and extend the object-oriented turn in Medieval Studies.
3. Diplomatic transcriptions and images of Folio and First Quarto texts of *Othello* come from the Internet Shakespeare Editions' facsimile reprints unless otherwise specified: <http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/facsimile/overview/play/oth.html>.
4. Diana Henderson, writing independently, discusses the erotics of the kamarbandh in an essay in the *Oxford Dictionary of Embodiment* (Henderson 2016).
5. Richard Burt points out in a personal communication that Shakespeare's play, too, concludes with a series of blame-ridden confrontations; notably, the epithet "devil" is used by Othello of Iago, Iago of Emilia, and Emilia of Othello in 5.2. It's also used of Desdemona by Othello in 4.1, and this is the scene that *Iago* transforms into comedy.

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